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AUTHOR Budge, Carol
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ABSTRACT

A study investigated patterns in plural marking in the English spoken in Hong Kong, largely as a second language. It focused on the effect of three types of prenominal morphemes: (1) those that are neutral with respect to plurality (e.g., "other, certain"); (2) modifiers indicating the noun should be marked for plural (e.g., "one of the, all, fewer"); and (3) the modifiers "some, any." The results suggest that the Hong Kong English speaker tends to mark plural where there is some semantic reminder that the noun is to be so marked, especially where the reminder is strong or unambiguous. Two additional factors appeared to play a part in plural marking. One was separation of the noun from the plural-indicating marker, and the other was a specific phonological environment, the ending of the stem form in the voiceless alveolar fricative (/s). Examination of secondary material supported these findings. Possible influence of the background language (Chinese) is discussed and similar findings for Singapore English are examined. (Contains 13 references.) (MSE)

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PLURAL MARKING IN HONG KONG ENGLISH[1]

Carol Budge
Department of Linguistics
Monash University

In Hong Kong, the domains of English are limited. It is used to a degree in business, government, the media, education, particularly tertiary education, and in the legal system. It is also an official language. However, spoken English is little used intra-ethnically, i.e. among Chinese, who make up 98 percent of the population, and instead Cantonese, the majority dialect/language, predominates (Luke and Richards, 1982; Luke, 1984).

This has consequences for Hong Kong English (HKE), the English spoken by Hong Kong residents whose background language is a Chinese dialect. HKE displays a number of features also found in other New Englishes (see Platt et al., 1984). These include lexical, phonological and morpho-syntactic features. But because HKE is little used for intra-ethnic communication, it exhibits only a certain degree of systematic variation and cannot be considered a stabilized interlanguage like Singapore English (for discussion of Singapore English as a stabilized interlanguage, see Platt & Weber, 1980:20, 1984).[2]

One area of HKE that exhibits some systematic variation and that shows some similarities to Singapore English is noun plural marking. Ho's study of Singapore English speakers revealed that they were more likely to mark for plural where the prenominal elements indicated that the noun should (prescriptively) be marked in this way (Ho, 1981). A somewhat similar pattern is seen in Hong Kong English.[3]

In this study of HKE,[4] the prenominal morphemes were grouped into three categories.[5] In some ways this was non-ideal, but a larger number of categories might have meant that too few tokens were obtained for each individual speaker (indeed, Category 3 scores for some speakers had to be ignored for this very reason). Excluded from consideration were plural reflexives, pronouns and non-regular forms. This was done in order to be able to compare plural marking with third-person singular present tense marking.

The first of the categories, which for convenience is called 'zero', included all pre-nominal modifiers which were neutral with respect to plurality or that did not indicate that the following noun should be marked for plural. This means modifiers such as adjectives, definite articles, other, certain, separate, some other, plural non-head nouns, and zero.

The second category includes all pre-nominal modifiers that indicate that the following noun should be marked for plural. Some of these were: a range of, one of the, one or two of the, numerals other than one, plural demonstratives,[6] all the, enough, less, fewer,[7] more, and sufficient. It will be realized that there were difficulties in deciding whether certain modifiers should be placed in Category 1 or 2.[8]

Careful examination of Category 2 reveals a range of modifiers, some of which only precede plural nouns and others which can precede both plural and singular nouns. For example, numerals (more than one) always precede plural nouns, whereas some other modifiers may precede singular or plural nouns, e.g.

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(1) a. all the book
all the books
b. some of the book
some of the books
c. all boys
all day

There are also in this category modifiers which can precede non-count nouns (see (2)) and modifiers that contain words which, on their own, accompany only singular nouns, but in which the modifier phrase can only accompany nouns marked for plural, as in (3):

(2) a. a lot of sugar
a lot of books
b. more water
more books

(3) a. one friend
one of my friends
b. half a year
one and a half years

The third category consisted of modifiers some/any. In standard spoken English, a stress contrast indicates the difference between some, meaning 'plural indefinite number' (unstressed) [sm̩] and some, meaning 'some or other' or 'exceptional' (as in 'He is some piano player'), [sʌm] (Quirk et al., 1972:136). There is also a segmental difference. In HKE there is no stress or segmental difference, requiring one to decide from context whether the noun after some should prescriptively be marked for plural, which at times is not an easy task.

Table 1 (below) shows the results. In comparing individual percentage scores with regard to Categories (1) and (2), 5 scores in Category (2) had to be discounted because they contained fewer than 5 tokens.[9] Of those that remained, 81.3 percent (61/75) of individuals marked plural more in Category (2) environments than in Category (1) environments (Two speakers had the same scores for both categories.) 42 individual scores for Category (3) environments had to be discounted because of insufficient tokens. 52.6 percent or 20 of the 38 that remained were higher for Category (3) environments than for Category (1) environments. A comparison of Category (3) environment scores and Category (2) environment scores revealed that 73 percent (27/37) were higher for Category (3) and 2 were the same (100 percent).

Table 1 - Plural Marking by 80 HKE Speakers

81.3%	(61/75)	Category 2	>	Category 1
52.6%	(20/38)	Category 3	>	Category 1
73.0%	(27/37)	Category 2	>	Category 3

Key: Category 1 - 'zero' before noun

Category 2 - 'quantifier' before noun

Category 3 - 'some' before noun

Such results, though not completely conclusive, suggest that HKE speakers tend to mark plural where there is some semantic reminder that the noun is to be marked as plural. It also seems that the stronger or more unambiguous this reminder or link is, the more likely it is that the following noun will be marked for plural. (All this runs contrary to any expectation that speakers will omit plural marking after plural indicating modifiers because of redundancy.) Although the relevant data was not analysed quantitatively, in the case of speakers with relatively high scores for plural marking, it seems that their non-standard tokens in which the preceding modifier indicated a plural noun included many tokens of the 'ambiguous' type e.g.[10]

(4) mostly a the management work, management, a supervision job, a, of park and playgrounds an all the facility run by the Urban Services Department...

(5) cause you know dat mos(t) customer are a(11) Chinese.

(6) an one of my bes(t) frien(d) was study in U, United States now...[11]

Where speakers marked plural less than 50 percent of the time, their 'deviations' included tokens of the type illustrated in (4), (5) and (6) but in addition they also produced tokens of the type illustrated in (7) where the prenominal modifier clearly indicates the noun should be marked for plural.

(7) two younger brother

Two additional factors appear to play a part in the absence of plural marking in general. The following examples indicate the first of these;

(8) many old-style building, old fashion building

(9) or dose, a, I mean, um, news poin(t)s a a, you know, discussion on socia(l), in problems

In (8), the noun is repeated with a slightly different adjective but without plural marking.The plural-indicating modifier in (9) is separated from the noun by more words and pauses than is usual. It may be that in these types of examples, the limits of short-term memory play a part in weakening the semantic link between the modifier and the noun, and the speaker finds it hard to remember that the noun should be marked for plural.

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Phonology also appears to play some part in plural marking (or the absence of it).[12] Cantonese has no final [s] or final clusters but only final nasals and a final voiceless stop series. It is therefore not surprising to find the reduction of clusters in HKE, particularly in final position. In addition, words ending in their stem form in the voiceless alveolar fricative [s], such as boss or class, and words ending in clusters containing [s], have a tendency to be left unmarked for plural, e.g.

(10) a. many gardens and many famous place
b. many waitress and waiters

In (b) 'the principle of minimum distance to the modifier' (mentioned above), works in favour of the first rather than the second noun being marked for plural; the opposite, however, has occurred, i.e. the second and not the first noun is marked for plural.

Final clusters that include [s] tend to be unmarked for plural and they may also be reduced. Where the initial consonant in a cluster is [s], the final consonant tends to be deleted and the plural omitted, e.g. guests [gests] --> [ges]; where the second consonant is [s], the [ɪz] plural marker is not added and the cluster may also be reduced (see also the discussion below in relation to third person singular present tense), e.g.

(11) 'telexes' [teleksɪz] --> [teleks]
'taxes' [tæksɪz] --> [tæs]

One can conclude, then, that the most important factor governing plural marking seems to be the presence of an unambiguously plural-indicating modifier before the noun. Less important are the less clearly plural-indicating modifiers in pre-nominal position. Factors such as phonological environment and a larger 'distance' or 'time' between the plural-indicating modifier and the noun would tend to inhibit plural marking.

An examination of secondary material, both written and spoken, reveals a similar type of pattern. The secondary material consisted of 32 transcripts of interviews conducted by Pierson and Bond of the Chinese University of Hong Kong and 40 Matriculation-level student essays. (Pierson and Bond interviewed 32 C.U. students as part of their research on interviewee reaction to interviewer ethnicity and language of interview - see Pierson and Bond, 1981 and 1982). Tables 2 and 3 show plural marking for the C.U. interviews and the Matriculation essays respectively. (Scores are expressed as totals as individual scores would have produced too few tokens. The scores were calculated by the author of this paper). For both the C.U. interviews and the Matriculation essays, subjects as a group marked plural least, according to the criterion of standardness, for Category (1) nouns (i.e. preceded by zero). However, while scores for standard marking of plural were highest for Category (2) for the Matriculation essays, they were highest for Category (3) for the C.U. interviews.

There are also other differences between scores for the Matriculation essays and those for the C.U. interviews. Each plural-marking score was lower for the C.U. interviews than the Matriculation essays. This is somewhat surprising. Only one in ten matriculation-level students gains a university place and one might therefore expect university students to have a 'higher' standard of English, i.e. in this instance, to produce a higher proportion of standard tokens. However, factors such as the differences between written and spoken English, differences in topic, etc., may have had an effect. In written English, problems such as that of distinguishing 'this' and 'these' are eliminated (unless the writer uses the same form for both). One might be tempted to talk of greater phonological interference in speech, i.e. -/s/-/z/-/ɪz/ being more difficult to pronounce after a consonant or consonant cluster. However, reversing the pattern, C.U. interviewees marked third person singular present tense (discussed below) more than the essay writers did.

Other material examined in a non-quantitative way, such as signs, notices in shops, advertisements and menus, provides further examples of non-standard absence of plural marking. Consider (12) and (13), which both involved either no quantifier or the sort of quantifier that is less 'strong' (i.e. not of the 'three boys' type).

(12) XX Hotel
... you can enjoy all facility at a very reasonable price
(taken from a billboard advertising a hotel on an outlying island)

(13) Soup and Sandwich Special (choice of one of the above sandwich)
(from a menu)

Sometimes the logical basis for non-standard absence of plural marking is apparent. One sees signs advertising jade and cultured pearl, where the writer has perhaps left pearl unmarked for plural by analogy with jade.

(14) and (15) illustrate two forms that are always plural (in the sense that they are used here) but which are frequently treated as singular in HKE. Both oversea (c.f. overseas) and downstair (c.f. downstairs) were used by my interviewees. There is in fact a bank called "Oversea Chinese Banking Corporation". In my view the non-standard forms of these two items have largely become fossilized.

(14) We pack, mail and deliver your purchases to oversea.
(sign on a window of an antique store)

(15) Fast food downstair
(cafe sign)

Other frequently occurring non-standard forms of this type are business hour and noodle[13] (the latter appears on menus).

How much has this pattern been influenced by the background language, Chinese? As stated above, Cantonese is the main dialect of Hong Kong and the language of interdialectal communication. In both Mandarin and Cantonese, plurality or quantity is not indicated by suffixation or any change in shape of the noun.[14] Instead, a pre-nominal morpheme or a numeral (more than one) plus a classifier serves this function (both Cantonese and Mandarin make use of numeral classifiers[15]; some structures, e.g. possessives, may be indefinite as far as plurality is concerned):

Mandarin

(16) sān kuài qián
3 classifier money
'3 dollars'

(DeFrancis, 1975:32)

Cantonese

(17) leung5 ga3 che1
2 class. car
'2 cars'

(Lau, 1972:129)

Can any background language influence be seen in the pattern of plural marking in HKE? Certainly no specific influence is evident; there is no evidence of classifiers or preverbal pluralising

particles in HKE.[16] If Cantonese has influenced HKE, it has done so in a general way. Just as the pre-nominal elements, especially numerals in Cantonese, serve to indicate to the speaker that the following noun has plural reference, so the pre-nominal elements in English indicating plural serve to signal to the HKE speaker that the noun should be marked for plural. Thus only indirect influence from Cantonese can be discerned.

It is also revealing to compare plural marking with marking of third person singular present tense as the predictable allomorphs, etc. of both are phonologically identical (see note 12 for details). An attempt was made to compare these grammatical features among my own interviewees. Although some speakers marked plural more than third person singular present tense, while others marked third person singular present tense more than noun plural, the number of tokens was too small for valid individual comparison. Though the number of tokens in secondary material was not large, it is apparent in both media and, particularly, in written material, subjects marked plural more than third person singular present tense (Tables 2 and 3).

M.L. Ho's 1981 thesis on the noun phrase in Singapore English provides an interesting comparison. Although her study was more detailed (she had more categories), her speakers (who were Chinese speakers of Singapore English) also marked for plural more where the semantics of the pre-nominal elements were plural-indicating (Ho, 1981:117). She, too, found a similar pattern of third person singular present tense marking. She attributes this to the absence of a "semantic unity" as regards the latter (Ho, 1981:17), i.e. whereas there is a semantic link between plural-indicating modifiers (numerals, quantifiers) and plural marking, there is no such link between third person subjects and the agreement marker on the verb. In a smaller-scale, though more detailed study of third person singular marking by ESL students from a range of background languages, Abraham found that there was a tendency for students to mark third person singular present tense more for particular verbs and this, she suggests, is due to factors such as "frequency with which they (i.e. the verbs) are heard..., the perceptual saliency of the morpheme when it is attached to particular verbs, and the difficulty in pronouncing verbs used with the morpheme" (Abraham, 1984:67). However, while she found that seem was one verb least frequently marked, my interviewees seemed to mark verbs like seem and appear relatively frequently in constructions such as it seems and it appears.

This leads us to a second question, namely whether such patterns are typical only of Singapore English and HKE or whether, for example, the tendency to mark plural more when there is some sort of semantic indicator preceding the noun is a strategy used by the majority of Chinese learners of English. Chen's study of the written errors of Taiwanese students does not lend itself to empirical comparison (it provides scores only of errors), although he does note that "errors" relating to plural marking (including absence of plural marking) are the most frequent of all noun-associated errors (Chen, 1979:104). All the examples that Chen gives of absence of plural marking are of the type commonly found among my data - they include zero before noun, some before noun, and a lot of (Chen, 1979:104). However, the question of whether the same type of pattern of plural marking is found in the English of other Chinese speakers/writers awaits further research in places like China and Taiwan, as well as in English-speaking countries.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Eleventh Australian Applied Linguistics Association Conference held at the University of Adelaide in August, 1986.

2. There are some Singaporeans who are native speakers of English but the English they acquire as children is, of course, a localized variety (J. Platt, personal communication).

3. An additional feature of HKE, though not one I have subjected to quantitative investigation, involves the re-analysis of nouns not normally marked for plural, such as non-count nouns, as in 'Underwears sold are not returnable or changeable'. Such a pattern is common in other New Englishes; indeed, Platt et al. list examples such as "staffs", "equipments", "funs", and "works" (Platt et al., 1984:51), which one also finds in HKE.

4. 80 subjects were interviewed for between 20 and 30 minutes. Subjects came from a variety of occupational backgrounds and the majority ranged in age from 20 to 35 years.

5. Types of nouns analyzed included both proper and common nouns (partly because of the problem of distinguishing the two), plural non-head nouns, and nouns which are always marked for plural but which some HKE speakers leave unmarked, e.g. oversea.

6. There was some difficulty in distinguishing these, as some HKE speakers have an invariable [dɪs] form, i.e. they fail to distinguish this and these. This may be partly the result of a loss of a voicing distinction in the final consonant and a lack of distinction between [ɪ] and [ɪ]. Further examples of the latter include the loss of distinction in pairs, such as living and leaving and read and rid.

7. In 'prescriptive norm' I include what is common in spoken 'native' English, although it may be considered by some to be prescriptively incorrect, e.g. less classes. I believe this to be justified by the fact that, to some extent, native speakers provide a model for HKE speakers.

8. Non-standard use of prenominal modifiers was treated in the following way: tokens such as much book, dat kind of boy and dat kind of books were considered to involve Category (1) type modifiers; tokens of the type in many kind of the book were included in Category (2).

9. Where the total number of tokens in a particular category was less than five, the percentage is not given.

10. Hesitation phenomena have generally been included. As far as possible, actual pronunciation is represented in spelling.

11. This type of token is different from those in (4) and (5). While in standard English, all can be followed by a singular or plural noun and most is followed by a singular or a mass noun, one of the is always followed by a plural noun. However, the presence of one in the modifier phrase may serve to confuse these second language learners and in that sense one of the can be judged 'ambiguous'.

12. The phonological factors involved in English plural marking i.e. /-s/ after voiceless non-sibilants, /-z/ after voiced non-sibilants and /-ɪz/ after sibilants, do not appear to affect the degree of plural marking.

13. This possibly involves analogy with rice.

14. Cantonese and Mandarin share the same writing system although they are not mutually intelligible.

15. Classifiers generally identify certain features of the noun they accompany and they are found in Chinese in counted noun phrases as well as in some other constructions.

16. The only evidence in all the data of any direct influence from Cantonese classifiers was the following, taken from a breakfast menu: Boiled eggs (two pieces).

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